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ABSTRACT

Guidelines which explain five phases of the consulting process are offered to educators contemplating the employment of consultants. Discussion of the first phase, "contact/entry," contains seven tips to consider before hiring a consultant and six tips on forming the base of the working relationship with the consultant. The second phase, "diagnosis," is described as the process of determining by examination the cause and nature of the client's problem; six guidelines are offered for the successful completion of this phase. The third phase, "response," is discussed as a critical portion of the consulting experience as the solutions sought in the project are presented for consideration; nine questions are offered to help ensure satisfaction with the consultant's performance. The fourth phase presented is "disengagement" which requires the evaluation of results to see if a "response" has been successful, and if there might be a further need for "response" revision and/or additional resources. The last phase is "closure" which is the termination of the working relationship. Four activities are given which should be included as part of the "closure" by the consultant. Concluding this paper is a consultant's resource list of 16 books. (EM)

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Dr. Dennis E. Richards

Clinic C-40

How to Find and Use A Good Consultant

Public education, like business, industry, government and other fields continues to increase in complexity. Major problems facing school district operations today include such diverse subjects as: declining enrollments, energy conservation, dwindling financial support, public criticism, labor negotiations, censorship and conflicting curriculum expectations. No longer is it entirely possible for schools to operate effectively solely on the expertise of local superintendents and elected boards of education.

As a result, alert superintendents and boards of education are turning to consultants for increasing amounts of advisory assistance in solving problems and in helping formulate long range planning in their schools. Quite often, however, consultants are engaged and the tasks being sought by the management team are either unclear in nature or not delineated at all.

The field of consultation has grown remarkably in recent years, yet surprisingly little has been written about it. What does a consultant do for an organization and how does he do it? Does he provide expert information, help to diagnose complex problems, give managers support and comfort, listen and provide counsel, solve organizational problems, help managers to implement difficult or unpopular decisions, or some or all of these (Schein, 1969)?

This in a nutshell is the dilemma faced by many boards of education and superintendents. Tilles (1961) has stated in his analysis of the consultation process, that unless the manager knows what he is looking for in a consulting relationship, he is likely to be sorely disappointed.

At the same time, it is recognized that the vast resources from the larger environment must be brought to bear on improving practices in the local school.

Blake (1976) wrote on the value of these resources by commenting on consultation in the following manner: "Consultation and education are probably the two most important influences behind the forward movement of society. In certain aspects, consultation is even more important than education in giving society its forward thrust. The reason is that consultation alone deals with actual "here and now" problems—ones that, if solved, can make a

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real difference to real people in the way they live and work".

Studies of consultation have tended to dwell mainly on the theoretical concepts of the process rather than on an examination of the behaviors and roles associated with it in public schools. Users of the services provided have frequently been taken for granted or untested assumptions have been made concerning their needs in the consultation process. Complaints and frustrations of clients have not been transformed into serious efforts to define the expectations held for external consultants; expectations that go unheeded often result in dissatisfaction to be experienced by the consultee.

When a decision is made to engage a consultant it signals that the school district either cannot deal internally with a problem situation, or it has looked at internally developed options and is seeking alternative modes of action that more closely approach the outcomes desired.

Schools are much like other organizations in attempts to prune personnel rosters to save costs. The end result of this is that management is forced to call more and more on outside or freelance consultants as needed rather than to load the payroll on a regular basis.

While the decision to turn to an external consultant may in itself not be a difficult task, the eventual selection of an individual and the setting of his or her performance expectations are likely to be much more challenging exercises for local school district management personnel.

Consulting to local school districts implies that a relationship between the consultant and the consultee must exist.

I would submit that the consulting process includes at least the following five phases:

1. Contact/Entry
2. Diagnosis
3. Response
4. Disengagement-Evaluation
5. Closure

I would like to briefly highlight the types of working tasks that appear in each of these phases. Certainly, the actions discussed at times spill over and between phases, but for the sake of this discussion I will center on the five previously outlined.

The act of contacting a particular consultant or consulting group may be taken because of previous experience, awareness of their reputation, knowledge of their specialization on particular problems, or merely a shopping expedition. What complicates this process is that there are no well defined criteria or credentials needed to market consulting skills. Rather, anyone with the business sense and marketing ability can enter the field of consulting. Most consultants gain experience from personal experimentation, reading, workshops, and college

coursework. Although this might not be the most desirable situation, it does point out the variety of experiences and preparations that are brought to the consulting role. Management must keep in mind that the basic requirements for independent consulting success are a knowledge or professional skill, usually technical or managerial, that's saleable, and packaging those skills into a specific, easy to grasp proposition that can be readily explained and promoted. Don't be fooled by the sales approach; remember, there are many management consultants, but not as many consultants to management. Before you hire your next consultant, you may want to consider the following tips:

1. Remember, you are doing the hiring and therefore retain many rights and options in the process.

2. Continually read current literature to learn names of prominent resources.

3. Develop a network of friends who will share references with you.

4. Check with your state and national associations such as NSBA for advice and references. Often these agencies have capable individuals.

5. Always ask for—and check out—references from the consultant. Most consultants have a handy package of "love letters" that they are always willing to supply at a moment's notice. However, it is often necessary to dig deeper into the consultant's past performance.

6. Identify the consultant's personal philosophy on the topic you are seeking assistance with and be sure that this is consistent with the Board of Education.

7. Don't be reticent about asking questions—at this point you're not committed to anyone.

Once contact has been completed and you have settled on an individual or group, the entry aspects become important. It is here that problems are jointly explored, perceived needs and symptoms discussed, relationships clarified, goals and roles defined. Also resource parameters are identified, methods are clarified, and a contract, written or unwritten, is negotiated. This phase is critical for a successful consulting experience as it forms the base from which all else is built. Significant considerations in this domain include:

1. Identifying who the consultant will be working with—Is there a difference between the client system and the individual or office that is going to pay bills?

2. Delineate the chain of command to be followed—How much support can be expected from the top power structure?

3. Outline the financial, physical and human resources that will be available to complete the project—Who can the consultant talk with? When? Is there a strict budget? Is support help available to the consultant?

4. Clearly state the major outcomes being sought from the experience.

5. Develop a projected time period allowed for accomplishment and desired outcomes, and the evaluation procedures to be used in assessing progress toward achievement. Set milestones of which the progress and working relationship will be reviewed for possible termination or continuation.

6. Negotiate a contract that allows the mutual opportunity to terminate the contract.

The second phase, diagnosis, is the process of determining by examination the cause and nature of the problem. It includes a needs assessment which begins with an appreciation of the client's goals and resources. It also takes into account the client system's culture, values, norms and beliefs.

An important issue here is the extent and degree to which the client (system) is willing to commit resources and to solve the problem.

Questionnaires, interviews, observations and analysis of previous performance data are common methods to use.

The following considerations are offered to assist in the successful completion of phase two activities:

1. Identify the problem confronting the organization and decide whose problem it really is. The district's? A building? The administration's?

2. Centralize important data in a workable format to aide the consultant and to reduce overall costs. Remember, time is money in this process! Don't hide anything that may cloud the issue in the future. Be up front in your dealings with the consultant.

3. Communicate to the consultant any peculiar norms, values or beliefs found in the system which may impact on eventual intervention strategies. Some things may just be unacceptable in your community.

4. Explore with the consultant what kinds of outcomes might be achieved, or work be desirable, if the working relationship is successful. (i.e., change in motivation, better public image, etc.)

5. Explore alternatives, potential side effects and traps, and the defining of the types of involvement and resources that will be needed at various stages of work.

6. Require written progress reports from the consultant for management personnel. Communicate often and process evaluation data and feedback in order to ensure adequate guidance for the plan, to ensure possibilities of replanning, and to avoid wasted effort and deadend failure.

The response phase includes the selection of a course of action, redefinition of the consultative goals, and identification of appropriate objectives, strategies and roles.

It also includes the planning and engagement of structured activities or interventions employed to correct the problem or situation.

These structured activities could be a workshop, series of training sessions, building a course, or solving one or more problems through one-on-one consultation.

The response phase is a critical portion of the consulting experience as the solutions sought in the project are presented for consideration. It is extremely important that what is discussed and eventually agreed upon in this phase represents the Board of Education's desires. Making the following requests or asking some of the following questions will help insure satisfaction with the consultant's performance:

1. Does the response encompass the original goals and directives?

2. Is the consultant able to communicate the nature of the problem and its solution components clearly both in oral and written forms?

3. Require the consultant to provide objective data to support the suggested response or solution.

4. Ask the consultant to develop accurate scenarios of the future of the situation if change occurs. When appropriate, model solutions.

5. Can the response be explained clearly and consisely to others that may not have been closely involved in the consultation process?

6. Have accommodations been included to help with the necessary skill development to increase the probability that the proposed solution will be successful rather than abortive?

7. Can the response be implemented given resources available?

8. Are there hidden "costs" involved? (i.e., threatening to personnel)

9. Is the response actually something new, or something old window dressed?

The fourth phase, disengagement, requires the evaluation of results to see if a response has been successful. An additional requirement is to see if there might be a further need for response revision and/or additional resources.

Using appropriate procedures to elicit feedback about progress, and to involve the appropriate persons in the assessment of this feedback, is a crucial part of the consultant's role during this phase. This continuing

assessment of consequences of action can save more dollars and faces and energy than any one part of the consultant's helping efforts.

Feedback is only helpful if it is utilized rapidly to examine goals, revise action strategies, and perhaps to activate decisions about the mobilization of additional resources.

An effort to decrease the client's dependency on the consultant so that the client can carry on alone should be part of this phase. This result can be accomplished by involving the client in monitoring progress and evaluation. Another element that fosters ownership in the "new idea" and decreases dependency on the consultant is to support "celebrations" about small successes on a stepwise path of action. The major motivation for continuing effort comes from frequent experiences of successful movement on a defined path leading somewhere. The successful consultant will also work with key parts of the client system to coordinate multiple activities and the involvement of individuals and units. Require your consultant to report on such plans and activities.

Closure is the termination of the working relationship. This process should be done in a way to ensure continuity and support.

The greatest problem with much change effort and consultation effort is that the changes achieved are either short run and followed by regression to old patterns; or only a fragile poor quality continuity of the new status; or marked by growth of counter-reactions which should be quickly coped with in order to guarantee the continuity of the change. Any good consultation plan should have as a part of its design the plan for follow-up support or provision for gradual termination of the consultant's help and installation within the sytem of the successfully used resources.

Consultants should include as part of their closure the following activities:

1. A written summary report.

2. A commitment to maintain periodic contact with the client after termination to monitor the outcomes of the consultation process.

Ultimately, the success of the consultation depends on:

1. Whether the manager has correctly diagnosed his needs;

2. Whether he has correctly communicated these needs to the consultant;

3. Whether he has accurately assessed the capability of the consultant to provide the right kind of information or services; and

4. Whether he has thought through the consequences of having the consultant gather information, and/or the consequences of implementing changes which may be recommended by the consultant.

Consultation should end on a mutually satisfying basis; if not, some of the earlier mentioned steps were probably skipped or not taken seriously.

Consultant's Resources List

Books

Argyis, Chris, Intervention Theory and Method: A Behavioral Science View. Addison-Wesley: Reading, Massachusetts, 1970.

Bell, Chip and Fred Margolis, A Presenter's Guide to Conferences, ASTD Publication: Washington, D.C., 1980, (202)484-2390.

Bell, Chip and Leonard Nadler, The Client-Consultant Handbook, Gulf Publishing Company: Houston, Texas, 1979. $14.95.

Bennis, W. G., Changing Organizations, McGraw-Hill: New York, NY, 1966.

Bermont, Hubert, How To Become a Successful Consultant in Your Own Field, Bermont Books, 815 15th Street, N.W., Washington, D.C. 20005, 1979, $20.00.

Blake, Robert and Jane Mouton, Consultation, Learning Resources Corporation, (800)854-2143, $22.50.

Block, Peter, Flawless Consulting, Learning Resources Corporation, (800)854-2143, $18.95.

Cohen, Herb, You Can Negotiate Anything, Bantam Books, New York, NY, 1980.

Craig, Robert L., Training and Development Handbook, A Guide to Human Resource Development, ASTD, Washington, D.C. or McGraw-Hill, N.Y., 1976. $26.50.

Drucker, Peter F., Management: Tasks, Responsibilities, Practices, Harper and Row, N.Y., 1974. $21.95.

Lant, Jeffrey L., The Consultant's Kit, JLA Publications, 50 Fallen St., Suite 507, Cambridge, Mass., 02138, (617)547-6372, or Learning Resources Corporation, (800)854-2143. $37.50

Lippett, Gordon and Ronald, The Consulting Practice in Action, Learning Resources Corporation. (800)854-2143. $15.00.

Pfeiffer, J. William and John E. Jones, A Handbook of Structured Experiences, Learning Resources Corporation, (800)854-2143, $84.00 for 8 volumes or $10.50 for each.

Schein, Edgar H., Process Consultation: Its Role in Organizational Development, Addison-Wesley: Reading, Mass., 1969.

Steele, Fritz, Consulting for Organizational Change, University of Massachusetts Prep, Amherst, Mass., 1975.

Tilles, S. Understanding the Consultant's Role. Harvard Business Review. 1961, 39, 87-99.